

What is self-censorship? Why do people self-censor or, worse, self-sabotage? How does someone stop? Self-censorship is not saying or doing something to avoid negative attention. Self-sabotage is purposely failing. People self-censor and self-sabotage to protect themselves from real emotional pain. Learning to stop self-censoring and self-sabotaging starts with learning self-love and building confidence. The biggest step towards self-love is identifying what is holding you back and discovering ways to move forward.

The best way to explore these topics is to face my own fears. I used traditional film photography to take photographs while I was engaged in activities I would not normally do. Photography is the most accurate representation of these tasks and, fittingly, an intimidating medium that I have never experimented with.

My overall message is to “live life fully and deliberately.” It is important to realize that self-censorship and self-sabotage are struggles that play out differently for everyone. What’s hard for someone else might not be hard for you; or, you might act out differently than someone else does. This subject is important because many people don’t achieve deep happiness and fulfillment because they are afraid of judgment or failure.

Natalie

In our daily lives many of us hold ourselves back. It's like we are always on the brink of something great, but never quite there. We seem to be stretching our arms out for something we can't quite reach. A new breakthrough, a new success, a new discovery is just in our grasp, but like a cloud, it turns to vapor every time we think it's close. What would you do if you achieved this grand new thing? Some might argue that many of us would be uncomfortable with our new success on a conscious or subconscious level. Because of this discomfort, we engage in behaviors that prevent us from being our best and most successful self. We compromise our best to be comfortable. The main subgroups of this type of behavior are: self-censorship and self-sabotage.

Self-Censorship

You might be asking yourself what self-censorship is and how it relates to you. Self-censorship is being overly careful about what you say or do to avoid negative attention. It's that voice in the back of your mind telling you "you can't." You *can't* talk about your opinion, you *can't* apply to your dream school or job, you *can't* do what you wish you could. What makes these self-censoring thoughts so dangerous is they often seem like common sense. It's important to remember that these thoughts simply are untrue. You can do *anything* once you stop making excuses for yourself.

Let's talk about the willingness to self-censor scale.¹ This scale will help you rate how much you personally are willing to self-censor.

The Willingness to Self-Censor Scale

For each statement, indicate whether you strongly disagree with the statement, disagree with the statement, neither agree nor disagree with the statement, agree with the statement, or strongly agree with the statement. Don't spend too much time on any question. Simply answer with your first impression.

- (1) It is difficult for me to express my opinion if I think others won't agree with what I say.
- (2) There have been many times when I have thought others around me were wrong but I didn't let them know.
- (3) When I disagree with others, I'd rather go along with them than argue about it.
- (4) It is easy for me to express my opinion around others who I think will disagree with me.
- (5) I'd feel uncomfortable if someone asked my opinion and I knew that he or she wouldn't agree with me.
- (6) I tend speak my opinion only around friends or other people I trust.
- (7) It is safer to keep quiet than publicly speak an opinion that you know most others don't share.

(8) If I disagree with others, I have no problem letting them know it.

Using a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale, a person's willingness to self-censor is defined as their average response after first reverse scoring items 4 and 8.

This test has been given to over 10,000 people ranging in age race and gender, and regardless of the population being tested, the internal consistency reliability of the measure is at least 0.70 and frequently higher. The people with higher scores have lower self-esteem and are less argumentative, more self-conscious and they also tend to feel positive emotions less frequently.¹

Self-Sabotage

Self-sabotage is the act of consciously or unconsciously creating problems for yourself that interfere with long-term goals. Some of the more common types of self-sabotage are: procrastination, dodging emotions, extreme modesty, self-medication, comfort eating and self-harm.² Though these things can make someone feel relief at the time, in the end they only hurt them more.³ Have you ever found out some great news? For example, you got an "A" on a paper or you finally got a promotion you have been wanting, then got sick or got in a fight with your significant other. If so, you might be a self-sabotager. People sometimes don't realize they are engaging in self-sabotaging behaviors. Connecting the behaviors to self-sabotaging consequences doesn't necessarily mean they will quit these behaviors.³

WHERE DO THEY STEM FROM?

Self-censorship

Self-censorship stems greatly from a theory called "groupthink." Groupthink is the practice of thinking or making decisions as a group in a way that discourages creativity or individual responsibility. Groupthink is a psychological phenomenon that occurs within a group of people, in which the desire for harmony or conformity in the group results in an irrational or dysfunctional decision-making outcome.⁴ Basically, we self-censor to avoid criticism and negative attention. This is also true in our more intimate one-on-one interactions. We censor ourselves to keep our relationships (romantic or otherwise) intact. Therapist Alison Davis says that these relationships go from relationships to "arrangements." If you don't do this or talk about that, we can stay the way we are. If you don't talk about your problems, we will stay comfortable.

¹ Hayes, Andrew F. "Willingness to Self-Censor." *Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D.* N.p., n.d. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.

² "Self-Sabotage: The Enemy Within." *Psychology Today*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Nov. 2015

³ "Psychology Today." *Self-Sabotage*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Nov. 2015.

⁴ *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com, n.d. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

Self-Sabotage

How we view ourselves comes from childhood. Our beliefs about ourselves are often one of two things. First, is from the way we were treated by parents, guardians, or other influential adults. If we grew up with a judgmental parent, we would very likely have these self-sabotaging behaviours.⁵ Second, is the negative thoughts and actions these same adults have about themselves. For example, if we had a parent who was an alcoholic, then the child is more likely to become an alcoholic also.⁵ As author Elizabeth Gilbert put it, “You need to learn how to select your thoughts just the same way you select your clothes every day. This is a power you can cultivate. If you want to control things in your life so badly, work on the mind. That’s the only thing you should be trying to control.”

In *The Big Leap*, Gay Hendricks talks about “upper limits.” The upper limit theory is that we all have a certain amount of good we can handle in our lives before we start to ruin it for ourselves. It’s called “our upper limit setting.” It’s a comfort zone of success and happiness. He believes, “When we exceed our internal thermostat setting and life gets *super duper OMG good* (we have an influx of money, get healthy and thin, find a great relationship) – we unconsciously do things to sabotage ourselves, so we can drop back to the old, familiar place where we feel in control.” According to Hendricks there are four basic reasons we self sabotage:

1. Feeling fundamentally flawed
2. Feeling disloyalty/abandonment
3. Fear that more success brings a bigger burden
4. The crime of outshining others

How are Self-Censorship and Self-Sabotage intertwined?

Both are mechanisms used to avoid negative attention or sometimes even attention in general. We self-censor to avoid arguments, and to keep order and comfort. We self-sabotage to avoid true failure *and* success. As long as we are doing these things nothing has to change. As long as we hold ourselves back, we can continue to be comfortable. Alison Davis says that self-censorship and self-sabotage are like best friends. They often coexist with self-worth at the root of both. Self-censorship and self-sabotage are both a way to protect our low self-worth from the ridicule of ourselves and others.

HOW TO STOP SELF-CENSORSHIP AND SELF-SABOTAGE

Self-Censoring

If you are anything like me, all this new information may seem overwhelming, but if you are an active self-censorer, there are steps you can take to start fixing these behaviors according to life coach Nigel Cook:

⁵ "Self-Sabotaging: Why We Get in Our Own Way." *PsychAlive*. N.p., 21 June 2013. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.

1. You should start to observe how often you self-censor. Particularly look at how often you choose *not* to do something because you are worried that others might judge you. Being aware is hugely important to solving the problem.⁶
2. Next, you should attempt to remove this filter. Quit self-imposed (and unnecessary) censoring. Get out of your comfort zone and get more comfortable with self-expression. Speak freely. Experimenting with speaking your mind to test the waters.⁶
3. Move on to larger and larger risks. A good example of this is doing an art piece or something else very expressive.⁶
4. Believe in what you say and do. This can involve affirmations or positive self-talk that work well for you. If you are uncomfortable with expressing yourself, start from where you are and slowly work up to where you want to be.⁶

A huge part of this process is loving yourself unconditionally and raising your self-worth. If you don't love and respect yourself, how can you expect to be open with others?

Self-Sabotage

Now that you can figure out where your self-sabotaging thoughts and actions stem from, you can really start to focus on the solution. It's important to become acquainted with our negative inner voices so we can recognize when we start to hear them. That way, we can start to pinpoint actions we want to change.⁷ A good example of this is if you start to notice yourself arguing with a significant other, you can stop and correct this behavior and eventually stop arguing so frequently.⁷ In his book *The Big Leap* Hendricks gives us some steps for dealing with self-sabotage:

- Step one - Separate from the destructive attitudes (critical inner voices) internalized based on painful early life experiences.
- Step two - Separate from the negative traits in our parents or influential caretakers that we've taken on as our own.
- Step three - Challenge the destructive defenses or adaptations we made to the pain we experienced growing up. These adaptations may have helped us in childhood but, very often, hurt us as adults. For instance, if we were used to being let down or rejected as children, we may have formed a defense that shuts us off from wanting or expecting much from others. Though this lowering of expectations may have seemed to cushion us from getting hurt as kids, this same defense can keep us from trusting or getting close to someone.⁷

⁶ Cook, Nigel. "Stop Censoring Yourself: Learning to Live Free | Holding Your Feet to the Fire." *Holding Your Feet to the Fire Stop Censoring Yourself Learning to Live Free Comments*. N.p., 15 June 2015. Web. 05 Nov. 2015.

⁷ Hendricks, Gay. *The Big Leap: Conquer Your Hidden Fear and Take Life to the next Level*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009. Print.

If it's fair to say that self-sabotage is a way to fail so that you don't damage your self-esteem, then it's also fair to say what you fear is true failure. Failure when you try your hardest. "It's not about failing, failing is a human concept. You only fail when you don't actually try. Being scared is normal, but don't take the easy way out." ⁷ Trying your hardest doesn't have to be about failing; it can be about trying.

Bibliography

- Cook, Nigel. "Stop Censoring Yourself: Learning to Live Free | Holding Your Feet to the Fire." *Holding Your Feet to the Fire Stop Censoring Yourself Learning to Live Free Comments*. N.p., 15 June 2015. Web. 05 Nov. 2015.
- Davis, Alison. "Self Censorship and Self Sabotage." Online interview. 13 Nov. 2015.
- "Definition of Self-censorship." *Self-censorship: Definition of Self-censorship in Oxford Dictionary (American English) (US)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.
Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com, n.d. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.
- "Do You Have An Upper Limit? Problem?" RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.
- Hayes, Andrew F. "Willingness to Self-Censor." *Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D.* N.p., n.d. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.
- Hendricks, Gay. *The Big Leap: Conquer Your Hidden Fear and Take Life to the next Level*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009. Print.
- "It's Here! My TEDx Talk: Permission For Success • ElizabethRider.com." *ElizabethRider.com*. N.p., 10 Apr. 2014. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.
- Orenstein, Peggy. *School Girls: Young Women, Self-esteem, and the Confidence Gap*. New York: Anchor, 1995. Print.
- "Psychology Today." *Self-Sabotage*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Nov. 2015.
- "Review -The Big Leap by Gay Hendricks." *The Invisible Mentor*. N.p., 09 Aug. 2011. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.
- "Self-Sabotage: The Enemy Within." *Psychology Today*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Nov. 2015
- "Self-Sabotaging: Why We Get in Our Own Way." *PsychAlive*. N.p., 21 June 2013. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.
- "Yoko Ono - Cut Piece (1965)." *YouTube*. YouTube, n.d. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.